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PRAYER

By
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Translated by
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Morehouse-Gorham Co.
New York
1948

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Printed in U. S. A.

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PREFACE TO ENGLISH TRANSLATION

ABOUT a year ago a friend in Manchester sent me unexpectedly and with strange opportuneness Dr. Alexis Carrel's *La Prière*. Both my wife and I felt at once when we read it that it said something important and that its message was even more relevant now than when it was written during the war, and as much to English-speaking as to French-speaking peoples. The translation which follows is the result of that mutual conviction.

We wish to thank Madame Carrel, the

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widow of Dr. Carrel, for her encouragement and approval, and for authorisation to publish this English translation.

C. J. WRIGHT,

Glynde Vicarage,

January, 1947

Near Lewes, Sussex.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IN DECEMBER, 1940, the author of these lines wrote in English for the widely circulated *American Readers' Digest*, an article on the power of prayer. This article was published at the beginning of 1941 after having been cut down and gone over by one of the editors. Then it was translated into French, probably in Switzerland, and appeared in the *Journal de Genève*. Later a religious weekly republished it in France. It was then that the author heard of this translation. He was not satisfied with it and decided at

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the beginning of January to write a new essay on prayer.

The author is neither a theologian nor a philosopher. He expresses himself in everyday language and uses words in their popular sense, sometimes in their scientific sense. He asks theologians to have for him the same indulgence that he would have for them, if they had to deal with a subject touching on physiology. This study of prayer is a very brief summing up of innumerable observations gathered during the course of a long career among the most diverse people: Westerners and Easterners, the sick and the healthy, Catholic priests, monks and nuns of all orders, Protestant ministers of all denominations, Rabbis, doctors and

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nurses, men and women of all professions and of every class of society. Besides, his experience as a surgeon, as a doctor, as a physiologist, the studies in the laboratory to which he devoted himself for many years, on the regeneration of the tissues and the healing of wounds, have enabled him to appreciate at their true value certain curative effects of prayer. He speaks only of things which he has himself verified or which he knows from men capable of honest and precise observations. He has preferred to be incomplete rather than to cite facts insufficiently proved. Above all he has striven to remain on the solid ground of reality.

To speak of prayer to the men of to-day seems at first sight to be a quite

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useless endeavour. Is it not, however, indispensable that we should know all the activities of which we are capable? For we cannot leave unused one of these powers without great danger to us and our descendants. The atrophy of the sense of the holy and of the moral sense reveals itself as harmful as the atrophy of the intelligence. These lines apply therefore to all—to unbelievers as well as to believers. Upon all, in fact, life, in order to succeed, imposes the same obligations. It demands that we conduct ourselves in the way prescribed by our bodily and mental structure. That is why no one should ignore the most profound and the most subtle needs of our nature.

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TO US men of the West, reason seems very superior to intuition. We much prefer intelligence to feeling. Science shines out, while religion is flickering. We follow Descartes and forsake Pascal.

Also we seek first of all to develop intelligence in ourselves. As to the non-intellectual activities of the spirit, such as the moral sense, the sense of beauty, and above all the sense of the holy, they are almost completely neglected. The atrophy of these fundamental activities makes of the modern man a being spirit-

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ually blind. Such an infirmity does not permit him to be an element good for the constitution of society. It is to the low standard of the individual we must attribute the collapse of our civilisation. The fact is, the spiritual shows itself just as indispensable to the success of life as the intellectual and the material. It is therefore urgent to revive in ourselves mental activities which, much more than intelligence, give strength to the personality. The most ignored among them is the sense of the holy or the religious sense.

The sense of the holy manifests itself chiefly by prayer. Prayer, like the sense of the holy, is, from all the evidence, a spiritual phenomenon. Now, the spiritual world is beyond the reach of our tech-

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niques. How then to acquire a positive knowledge of prayer? The world of science comprehends fortunately the whole of the observable. And it can, by the intermediary of the physiological, expand to the manifestations of the spiritual. So it is by systematic observation of the man who prays that we shall learn in what consists the phenomenon of prayer, the technique of its production, and its effects.

Esoteric
Only understood
by the initiated

DEFINITION OF PRAYER

PRAYER seems to be essentially a tension of the spirit towards the immaterial substratum of the world. In general, it consists in a complaint, a cry of anguish, a demand for succour. Sometimes it becomes a serene contemplation of the immanent and transcendent principle of all things. One can define it equally as an uplifting of the soul to God. As an act of love and adoration towards Him from Whom comes the wonder which is life. In fact, prayer represents the effort of man to communicate with

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an invisible being, creator of all that exists, supreme wisdom, strength and beauty, father and saviour of each one of us. Far from consisting in a simple recitation of formulas, true prayer represents a mystic state when the consciousness is absorbed in God. This state is not of an intellectual nature. Also it remains as inaccessible, as incomprehensible to the philosophers and to the learned. Just as with the sense of beauty and of love, it demands no book knowledge. The simple are conscious of God as naturally as of the warmth of the sun, or the perfume of a flower. But this God, so approachable by him who knows how to love, is hidden from him who knows only how to understand. Thought and word are at fault

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when it is a matter of describing this state. That is why prayer finds its highest expression in a soaring of love through the obscure night of the intelligence.

ITS TECHNIQUE— HOW TO PRAY

HOW must one pray? We have learned the technique of prayer from Christian mystics from St. Paul up to St. Benedict and to the crowd of anonymous apostles who for twenty centuries have initiated the peoples of the West to the religious life. The God of Plato was inaccessible in his grandeur. That of Epictetus was confused with the soul of things. Jahveh was an oriental despot inspiring terror and not love. Christianity on the contrary has brought God within the reach of man. It has given Him a

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countenance. It has made of Him our Father, our Brother, our Saviour. To reach God there is no longer need of a complex ceremonial or of bloody sacrifices. Prayer has become easy and its technique simple.

To pray it is only necessary to make the effort of reaching out towards God. This effort must be affective and not intellectual. For example, a meditation on the greatness of God is not a prayer, unless it is at the same time an expression of love and of faith. Thus the spoken prayer, following the method of La Salle, leaves the domain of intellectual attention in order to reach that of immediate feeling. Whether short or long, whether vocal or only mental, prayer should be like the

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conversation of a child with its father.

"We come as we are," said one day a little Sister of Charity who for thirty years had been consuming her life in the service of the poor. In fine, one prays as one loves, with one's whole being.

As to the form of prayer, it varies from the short aspiration towards God, up to contemplation, from the simple words spoken by a country woman before The Calvary at the cross road, up to the magnificent Gregorian chanting under the arches of the cathedral. Solemnity, grandeur and beauty are not necessary to the efficacy of prayer. Very few men have known how to pray like St. John of the Cross, or St. Bernard of Clairvaux. But there is no need to be eloquent in order

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to be heard. In judging the value of prayer by its results, our most humble words of supplication and praise seem as acceptable to the Master of all beings, as the most beautiful invocations. Formulas mechanically recited are in some wise a prayer, even as the flame of a Church candle. It is sufficient that these inert formulas and this material flame should symbolise the flight towards God of a human being. One prays also by action. St. Louis de Gonzague said that the accomplishment of duty is equivalent to prayer. The best way of communing with God is without doubt fully to accomplish His will. "Our Father, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." And doing God's will mani-

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festly consists in obeying the laws of life,
as they are inscribed in our tissues, our
blood and our spirit.

Prayers, which rise like a great cloud from the surface of the earth, differ from
each other as much as the personalities of
those who pray. But they consist of varia-
tions on two main themes: distress and
love. It is entirely legitimate to implore
the help of God to obtain what we need.
Yet it would be absurd to ask for the
gratification of a whim or for what our
own effort would procure. The impor-
tunate, obstinate, aggressive petition is
heard. A blind man, seated by the way-
side, shouted his supplications more and
more loudly in spite of those who wanted
to silence him. "Thy faith hath made

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thee whole," said Jesus, who was passing that way. At its loftiest, prayer ceases to be a petition. Man lays bare to the Master of all things, that he loves Him, that he thanks Him for His gifts, that he is ready to accomplish His Will, whatever it is. Prayer becomes contemplation. An old peasant was sitting alone in the back pew of an empty church. "What are you waiting for?" he was asked. "I am looking at Him," he answered, "and He is looking at me." The value of a technique is measured by its results. Every technique of prayer is good which draws man nearer to God.

WHERE AND WHEN TO PRAY

WHERE and when to pray? One can pray anywhere. In the road, in a car, in a railway carriage, in the office, in the school, in the factory. But one prays better in the fields, the mountains and the woods, or in the solitude of one's own room. There are also the liturgical prayers offered in church. But whatever the place of prayer, God only speaks to the man who has established calm within himself. Inward calm depends at the same time on our organic and mental state and on the milieu in

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which we are plunged. Peace of body and spirit is difficult to obtain in the confusion, the bustle and the dispersion of the modern city. There is need to-day of places for prayer, preferably churches where the towns-people can find, if only for a brief moment, the physical and psychological conditions indispensable to their inward tranquillity. It would neither be difficult nor costly to create thus little islets of peace, attractive and beautiful in the centre of the uproar of the city. In the silence of these refuges, men could, in lifting up their thoughts to God, rest their muscles and their organs, relax their spirit, clarify their judgment and receive the strength to support the hard life under which our civilisation crushes them.

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It is when prayer becomes a habit that it operates on the character. It is necessary therefore to pray frequently. "Think of God more often than you breathe," said Epictetus. To pray on rising and then to behave the rest of the day like a pagan is absurd. Very brief thoughts or mental invocations can hold a man in the presence of God. All conduct is then inspired by prayer. Thus understood, prayer becomes a way of life.

EFFECTS OF PRAYER

PRAYER is always followed by a result if made under proper conditions. "No man has ever prayed without learning something" wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nevertheless prayer is looked upon by modern men as a useless habit, a vain superstition, a remnant of an uncivilised existence. In truth, we are almost completely ignorant of its effects.

What are the causes of our ignorance? First, the rarity of prayer. The sense of the holy is on the way to disappearance among civilised people. It is probable that the number of Frenchmen who pray

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habitually does not exceed more than four or five per cent. of the population. Further, prayer is often sterile. For most of those who pray are egoistic, lying, proud, pharisees incapable of faith and love. Finally, its effects, when they occur, very often escape us. The reply to our demands and to our love is usually given in a slow, insensible and almost inaudible way. The little voice which murmurs this reply in the depths of our souls is easily smothered by the clamour of the world. The material results of prayer, they too are obscure. They are generally confounded with other phenomena. Few people, even among priests, have thus had the chance of observing them in a precise way. And doctors, through lack

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of interest, often allow cases within their reach to pass without study. Further, the observers are often baffled by the fact that the reply is far from being always the one expected. For example, he who seeks to be cured of an organic malady remains uncured, but experiences a profound and inexplicable moral transformation. Nevertheless, the habit of prayer, though exceptional amongst the whole population, is relatively frequent among the groups that have remained faithful to the ancestral religion. It is within these groups that it is still possible to-day to study its influence. Among its innumerable effects, the doctor above all has the opportunity of observing those we call psycho-physiological and curative.

PSYCHO-PHYSIOLOGICAL EFFECTS

PRAYER acts on the spirit and on the body in a way which seems to depend on its quality, its intensity and its frequency. It is easy to perceive the frequency of prayer, and to a certain extent its intensity. Its quality remains unknown, for we have not the means of measuring others' faith and their capacity for love. Yet, the way in which he who prays lives can enlighten us on the quality of the invocations he puts up to God. Even when prayer is weak and consists mainly of mechanical recitations, it exerts

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an effect on the behaviour. It strengthens at the same time the sense of the holy and the moral sense. In the centres where prayer is wont to be made, there is a certain persistence in the sentiment of duty and of responsibility, less jealousy and wickedness, a certain kindness toward others. It appears manifest that with equal intellectual development, character and moral value are higher among individuals who pray, even in a mediocre way, than among those who do not pray.

When prayer is habitual and really fervent, its influence becomes very clear. It is slightly comparable to that of an internal secretion gland, as for example the thyroid gland or the suprarenal gland. It consists in a kind of mental and organic

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transformation. This transformation operates in a progressive way. One might say that in the depths of consciousness a flame is kindled. Man sees himself as he is. He discovers his egoism, his cupidity, his errors of judgment, his pride. He bends himself to the accomplishment of moral duty. He endeavours to acquire intellectual humility. Thus there opens before him the Kingdom of Grace . . . little by little an inward appeasement is produced, a harmony of the nervous and moral activities, a greater endurance in regard to poverty, slander, worries, the capacity for enduring without enfeeblement the loss of dear ones, pain, illness, death. A doctor who sees a patient give himself to prayer, can indeed rejoice. The

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calm engendered by prayer is a powerful aid to healing.

However, prayer must not be likened to morphia. For it leads, at the same time as to tranquillity, to an integration of the mental activities, a sort of flowering of the personality. Sometimes heroism. It stamps its believers with a peculiar seal. The purity of the glance, the tranquillity of the bearing, the serene joy of the expression, the virility of the conduct, and when necessary, the simple acceptance of the soldier's or martyr's death, betray the presence of the treasure hidden in the depths of the organs and the spirit. Under this influence, even the ignorant, the backward, the feeble, the poorly endowed make better use of their intellectual and

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moral forces. Prayer, it seems, lifts men above the mental stature which belongs to them by their heredity and their education. This contact with God impregnates them with peace. And peace radiates from them. And they carry peace wherever they go. Unhappily there is at present in the world a very small number of people who know how to pray in an effective way.

CURATIVE EFFECTS

IT IS the curative effects of prayer which in all epochs have chiefly attracted the attention of men. Even to-day, among people who pray, one speaks fairly frequently of healings obtained in answer to supplications addressed to God and His saints. But when it is a matter of illnesses susceptible of spontaneous cure, or from the help of ordinary medications, it is difficult to know which has been the real agent of healing. It is only in the cases where all therapeutics are inapplicable or have failed, that the results of

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prayer can be surely proved. The medical board of Lourdes has rendered a great service to science in demonstrating the reality of the cures. Prayer has sometimes, so to speak, an explosive effect. Patients have been cured almost instantaneously of affections such as lupus of the face, cancer, kidney troubles, ulcers, tuberculosis of the lungs, of the bones or peritoneum. The phenomenon is produced nearly always in the same way. Great pain, then the feeling of being cured. In a few seconds, at most a few hours, the symptoms disappear and the anatomic lesions mend. The miracle is characterised by extreme acceleration of the normal processes of healing. Never has such an acceleration been observed up

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till now in the course of their experiences by surgeons and physiologists.

For these phenomena to take place, it is not necessary for the patient to pray. Little children still unable to speak and unbelievers have been cured at Lourdes. But near them, some one prayed. Prayer made for another is always more fruitful than when made for oneself. It is on the intensity and the quality of the prayer that its effect seems to depend. At Lourdes miracles are much less frequent than they were forty or fifty years ago. For the sick no longer find there the atmosphere of profound contemplation which formerly reigned there. The pilgrims have become tourists and their prayers inefficacious.





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Such are the results of prayer of which I have a sure knowledge. Alongside these, there is a multitude of others. The history of saints, even of modern saints, mentions many marvellous cases. It is unquestionable that most of the miracles attributed, for example, to the Curé d'Ars, are veridical. This mass of phenomena introduces us into a new world, the exploration of which has not begun and will be fertile in surprises. What we already know for certain is that prayer produces tangible effects. However strange this may appear, we must consider as true, that whosoever asks receives, and that the door is opened to him who knocks.



MEANING OF PRAYER



TO SUM up, everything happens as if God listened to man and answered him. The effects of prayer are not an illusion. One must not reduce the sense of the holy to the anguish experienced by man before the dangers which encompass him and before the mystery of the universe. Nor must one make simply of prayer a sedative, a remedy against our fear of suffering, of illness and of death. What then is the meaning of the sense of the holy? And what place does nature itself assign to prayer in our life?

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Truly, this place is very important. In nearly all ages the men of the West have prayed. The ancient city was principally a religious institution. The Romans erected temples everywhere. Our ancestors of the middle ages covered with cathedrals and gothic chapels the soil of Christendom. In our own times, above each village rises a belfry. It was by churches, as by universities and factories, that the pilgrims who came from Europe set up in the new world the civilisation of the West. In the course of our history, prayer has been a need as elemental as that of conquering, of working, of building, or of loving. In truth, the sense of the holy appears to be an impulse from the very depths of our nature, a fundamental

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activity. Its variations in a human group are nearly always bound to those of other basic activities, the moral sense and character, and sometimes the sense of the beautiful. It is this so important side of ourselves that we have allowed to become atrophied, and often to disappear.

It must be remembered, that man cannot without danger behave according to his whim. To succeed, life must be led following invariable rules which depend on its very structure. We run a grave risk when we allow to die in ourselves some fundamental activity, whether it be of the physiological, intellectual or spiritual order. For example, the neglect of the development of the muscles, of the bodily frame and of the non-rational activities

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of the spirit among certain intellectuals is as disastrous as the atrophy of the intelligence and of the moral sense among certain athletes. There are innumerable examples of prolific and strong families which produce only degenerates or die out, after the disappearance of ancestral beliefs and the cult of honour. We have learnt from hard experience that the loss of the moral sense and of the sense of the holy in the majority of the active elements of a nation leads to the downfall of that nation and its subjection to the foreigner. The downfall of ancient Greece was preceded by an analogous phenomenon. From all the evidence, the suppression of mental activities required by nature is incompatible with the fulfilment of life.

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In practice, the moral and religious activities are bound together. The moral sense vanishes soon after the sense of the holy. Man has not succeeded in building, as Socrates desired, a moral system independent of all religious doctrine. Societies in which the need for prayer has disappeared are generally not far from degeneracy. That is why all civilised peoples—unbelievers as well as believers—must be concerned with this grave problem of the development of every basic activity of which the human being is capable.


For what reason does the sense of the holy play such an important role in the fulfilment of life? By what mechanism does prayer operate upon us? Here we

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leave the domain of observation for that of hypothesis. But hypothesis, though risky, is necessary to the progress of knowledge. We must remember, first of all, that man is an indivisible whole composed of tissues, organic liquids and of consciousness. He is not therefore entirely contained within the four dimensions of time and space. For consciousness, if it dwells in our organs, at the same time extends beyond the physical continuum. On the other hand, the living body which seems to us independent of its material environment, that is to say of the physical universe, is in reality inseparable from it. For it is intimately bound to this milieu by its incessant need of the oxygen of the air and the foods



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provided by the earth. Are we not permitted to believe that we are plunged into a spiritual milieu which we could no more do without than the material universe, that is to say the earth and the air? And this milieu would be none other than the Immanent Being, in all beings and transcending them all, whom we call God. Prayer could then be considered as the agent of natural relations between consciousness and its own milieu. As a biological activity dependent upon our structure. In other words, like a normal function of our body and of our spirit.



CONCLUSION

TO sum up, the sense of the holy takes on, in relation to the other activities of the spirit, a singular importance. For it puts us in communication with the mysterious immensity of the spiritual world. It is by prayer that man reaches God and that God enters into him. Prayer appears to be indispensable to our highest development. We should not look upon prayer as an act in which only the weak-minded, the beggars or cowards indulge. "It is a shameful thing to pray" wrote Nietzsche. In fact, it is

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no more shameful to pray than to drink or to breathe. Man needs God as he needs water and oxygen. Joined to intuition, to the moral sense, to the sense of the beautiful and to the light of intelligence, the sense of the holy gives to the personality its full flowering. There is no doubt that fulfilment of life demands the integral development of each of our activities, physiological, intellectual, affective and spiritual. Spirit is at the same time reason and sentiment. We must therefore love the beauty of science and also the beauty of God. We must listen to Pascal with as much fervour as we listen to Descartes.

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